



Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-679-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.

MY STORY

By Sarah (Luel) Brett

BACKGROUND

I was born in Pabianice, Poland, on March 1, 1924, the first grandchild in the Grinberg and Luel family. My mother, Tauba Grinberg, lived in Pabianice before she was married. My father, Shloima Luel came from Lodz. He had a textile factory in partnership with his brother, Shalom Luel; brothers-in-law Izrael Izbicki and David Dembinski. They manufactured fabrics for shirts. Father designed the various fabric patterns, took care of running of the factory in Pabianice, and commuted several times a week to Lodz by streetcar, about a thirty-minute ride. He and his partners had a store and warehouse on Piotrkowska ulica. Uncle Dembinsky used to go on the road as a salesman to different parts of Poland. My father's parents, two brothers and two sisters lived in Lodz. I used to visit them often.

I went to a private kindergarten. Among other things, I was taught to sing and dance so my parents could show me off at the weddings of their younger siblings. Afterward, I attended public elementary school for Jewish boys and girls. That meant we went six days a week with Saturday off. There were two Jewish schools in Pabianice; however, we were allowed to speak Polish only. The subjects taught were Reading; Writing; Math; History; Geography; Gym; Art; Choir, and Bible class. The director of the school was Jewish and teachers were Polish and Jewish.

Girls from observant religious families went to *Beth Yakov* four afternoons a week to learn Yiddish and Hebrew. It was organized by the Orthodox men of Pabianice. Young Jewish women, trained and educated in a Seminary in Krakow established by Sara Shenirer, were our teachers. We learned Hebrew prayers, Yidish reading and writing, songs and everything pertaining to Jewish religion.

Big cities like Lodz and Warsaw had private Jewish parochial schools. My cousins, Gita and Golda Dembinsky in Lodz, attended parochial school and learned secular and Jewish subjects.

After seventh grade, my mother insisted that I attend gymnasium. My father wanted me to attend a business school to learn Accounting so I could help him in his textile business. Mother prevailed. She was a romantic and wanted me to get a liberal education. It was expensive because I had to go to a private Jewish gymnasium and travel every day to Lodz. Pabianice had a state-supported gymnasium, but you had to attend Saturday with Sunday off. Several Jewish girls did attend—their families didn't observe *Kashrut*, *Shabbat*, or Jewish holidays. There was also a German gymnasium in Pabianice. Since I was always protected by my parents and lived in a very observant Jewish home, it was a positive experience to commute every day and come in contact with many people, students, and adults of different religions and beliefs.

The summer of 1939 our whole family spent in Kolumna, a summer resort, my mother, sisters Rozka and Frumka, my brother Yacov and myself. I was the oldest child and I did care sometimes for my younger siblings; however, we always had a maid so my help consisted of taking them for a walk or playing with them. My sister Rozka was one year younger than I; Frumka was six years younger; and Yacov ten years younger. Some of our parents' friends and their children would also come and we would spend many pleasant times together. Besides swimming, hiking in the woods, and bike riding, the girls would learn how to knit, embroider and crochet from my mother and her friends. Father would come on Friday and stay for the weekend. Grandmother would come, for a few days only, during our stay. She had to attend to her store where she sold housewares, crystal, porcelain, dishes, pots, pans, flatware, and also cylinders for kerosene lamps.

Grandmother lived with us. She took her vacations when my mother took care of the store. She went to Zakopane or Otwock. These were resorts with special baths for various ailments.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

<https://archive.org/details/bib292757>

THE WAR BEGINS

The talk of the times was war. Was there going to be one or not? We young kids even speculated that it might be exciting to live through one, foolish kids that we were. In school we read about World War I and learned about bombs, what kind there were, about bomb shelters and how to stock them, how to protect ourselves and how to use a gas mask.

On September 1, 1939, we heard the frightening noise of bombs, not knowing how close they were. Actually, the Germans were flying and dropping their bombs on the outskirts of the city, but it seemed like it was overhead. I can't feel the terror and emotions after all these years, but I remember that our whole family and the whole apartment house went down to the neighbors who lived on the ground floor. There it was supposed to be safer, in case a bomb hit the building. We lived on the second floor. The bombing continued into the night. I was hiding my head under my father's arm and my teeth were literally chattering; I was not able to stop it. I was fourteen years and I don't remember what went on around us.

The front of our apartment building was on the main street and people were fleeing the city on foot or wagons, running away from the advancing Germans. We also went, either the first or second evening. Grandmother and my little brother, almost five years old, were put on a wagon with some people and the rest of us set out on foot for Lodz, which was fifteen kilometers. The tramway was not running.

Father had some Germans working for him as weavers and was afraid that they might want to harm us after the German Army entered Pabianice. I don't remember how we got to Lodz to my Uncle Israel and Aunt Machcia Izbicki, my father's sister, or how many days we stayed there. I think it was after a couple of days that my Grandmother and I went back to Pabianice. The tramways were running again. We were scared and didn't know what to expect, but got home safely. The first thing we were told was to darken the windows.

Suddenly the German tanks started to rumble on the main road. After a few days, the rest of the family came back, except for my father. This precaution

was right. Our first personal encounter with the German terror was when one of the Polish Germans who worked for Father came with a German soldier, pounding on the door and shouting for Father. They searched the whole apartment, yelling obscenities. They left, finally, without harming us.

In the meantime, a lot of people were leaving for good. Some went to Warsaw, some to Lithuania and Russia, mostly young, unattached people. Families with young children stayed, hoping for the best. My grandmother cooked big kettles of soup and distributed it in the courtyard to people on the run or to soldiers coming back from the front.

THE TERRORIZING

As the Germans settled in Pabianice, the terrorizing of the Jews began. Pabianice had a lot of rich Germans in the textile industry. Krushe-Ender had a textile factory of several blocks long. Then there were some Germans that pretended to be Poles under the Polish government. These people were the worst. They befriended German soldiers and went on a rampage. They robbed and beat. They dragged out Jewish women to do filthy jobs and forced men to do useless work like carrying rocks from one place to another.

Gradually the Germans started to confiscate businesses and factories under some legal pretext. They took over my Uncle Abram's (my mother's youngest brother) beautiful store of radios, electrical appliances and chandeliers. He had a beautiful wife, Andrza and three children, a girl and two boys. Since he was an excellent electrician, he worked for the Germans repairing radios and doing other electrical jobs. He was treated well and was able to move freely around the city, even after the Ghetto was created. The Germans confiscated my father's factory, machines, yarns, etc. in Pabianice. I suppose the same happened with the huge bolts of fabrics in Lodz.

Immediately came the order that every Jew had to wear a yellow armband. After a while, this was changed to a yellow star on the back and front of our clothes. The Jews were forbidden to walk on the sidewalk, but had to walk on the road. They became a subject of cruel treatment and brutality.

The occupying authorities had very large and well-organized pro-Hitler elements among the local German population. They were at the disposal of the local administration and had the Jews in constant terror. The local Nazis were well aware of who among the Jews of the city owned what. The Jews were subjected to harassment, persecution, and physical abuse. They were stopped on the streets, roughed up, forced to perform the most outrageous jobs, some of which were absolutely useless.

They were dragged out of their apartments and robbed of any valuables for the taking. Eventually came anti-Jewish ordinances, freezing bank accounts, forced labor to be performed for the Germans, a curfew, and establishment of a German trusteeship in all Jewish factories and enterprises.

THE GHETTO

My father returned from Lodz after a few weeks. He often had to hide in the attic when the Nazis were rounding up people for labor. In the middle of February 1940, the Ghetto was created. Eight thousand Jews were cramped into a few blocks. Each family was allowed to have one room. One room served as a bedroom, kitchen and dining area. Uncle Abram with his family moved into our apartment. We were able to share the kitchen. There was a curfew. We were allowed on the street only at certain hours.

The streets were not enclosed with wires, so there was a lot of smuggling going on. One Polish weaver had some bolts of fabrics that belonged to my father. He smuggled them into the Ghetto and father, in turn, sold it to another smuggler. The money helped us to buy food and fuel.

Very often you heard comments that as bad as our situation was, if the Nazis would permit the families to stay together, we'll be able somehow to survive the war. It's incredible. My grandmother was so certain that with G_d's help, things must turn around, because G_d is on our side; we are just being tried. Most people were full of hope in spite of all the difficulties.

In the few hours that we were allowed on streets, if time permitted, young kids walked with their friends. I used to walk with a friend, Tema Granat. Among

others things, we thought: *What does the outside world think of us being confined like animals in a cage?* I belonged to a Zionist organization *Hashomer Hatzair*. A group of young people would get together at a friend's house and dream of better times to come in Israel when the war was over.

PROTECTORAT

In the fall of 1940, the Germans declared part of Poland the Reich and part Protectorat. This is hazy now, but I think that my parents thought that the Protectorat would be safer for the Jews and we should try to get there. My father and two sisters would smuggle to the city of Kielce, which was Protectorat and if they found things agreeable, the rest of us, mother, grandmother, Yacov and myself would follow.

We hollowed out big loaves of bread, stuffed some money and jewelry into them and covered them with the cut out dough. They took along some clothes and bedding. I cannot remember how they went. I just know that we were terrified to death for several days that they might be caught by Germans. Finally we got a postcard from them that they arrived safely. As incredible as it seems to me now, the mail worked normally and Jews could correspond. We were careful not to write anything to offend the Germans. It seems to me that at this time there was no Ghetto in Kielce. My father and my sisters found rooms with a nice family and we used to get very nice letters from them.

At the same time, we found out the pitfalls of a divided family, my mother especially. She was so sad and losing weight just from worrying about what would become of us. Months passed and it was clear that we were not going to Kielce to join my father and sisters. After less than a year, my father and sisters smuggled back into Pabianice Ghetto. It was a very heartrending reunion. We all cried, happy that we are reunited again and sad, now knowing what the future had in store for us.

THE SLAPPING OF RUBINSTEIN

While my father was away, I went through what I felt was a traumatic experience. In the Ghetto there were various workshops set up to work for the Germans. Young people tried to get employment to earn some money and not to be sent for outside labor. I applied for work in a tailor shop. Since I wasn't called after some length of time, my Uncle Abram, without consulting me, took it upon himself to do something about it.

Uncle Abram had a permit to work outside the Ghetto. He repaired radios and did electrical work for the Germans. He asked one of his German supervisors to intervene with Rubinstein (the elteste of our Judenrat) to give me a job. Well, the German didn't ask, he ordered Rubinstein to give me a job, and in addition, he slapped Rubinstein in the face. Everyone that knew about it was in an uproar. When Mother and I found out about it, we were mortified. I was the cause of a Jew being slapped by a German. Rubinstein was a representative of the Ghetto. He dealt and negotiated food supplies, labor, and workshops with the German supervisors of the Ghetto.

WORK AT THE TAILOR SHOP

Finally, I received a notice to go to work. To this day, it's hard for me to imagine how I got up the courage to go to the tailor shop. First, I had to sign up at the office where Rubinstein's son, who was a little older than I, worked. He didn't say anything and took me up to one of the shops that were making German uniforms. I was assigned to finishing. At first everyone was very hostile. The master tailor, an older Jew, and some of his children, worked at sewing machines, in all, about twenty tailors and dressmakers and several girls at finishing.

I was completely inexperienced. Reluctantly, some of the girls showed me how to use a thimble and what I was supposed to do, how to handle the fabric and needle. The going was rough and it took a few days until I got the hang of it. I dreaded every morning to face their anger and my clumsiness. As days passed and they got to know me, things slowly turned for the better. I became proficient

at sewing and my co-workers could tell that I had nothing to do with the dreadful incident of Rubinstein being slapped.

At one time I contracted eczema in the inside of my elbows, behind the knees, and under my arms. The doctor said it might have come from eating old cheese. He tried some ointments, but nothing helped. Finally, he gave me a blood transfusion from my sister Rozka and this, evidently, cleared the rash. After liberation, when my sister was so ill, she asked that perhaps a transfusion of my blood would help her, but no one paid any attention.

MOTHER'S ILLNESS

Several months before we were resettled to Lodz Ghetto, my mother fell very ill with typhus. She was taken to a sort of hospital that was set up in the Ghetto in one of the houses. Grandmother would make special foods for her and take it to her. We kids went every day to take a glimpse of her through the window. She was on the first floor. Up to this point, we lived in constant fear, but the thought of losing Mother at this time makes me cry to this day, just as I am writing this. After Mother recovered, the mood in our family was upbeat, as if even the war were going to end and all was going to be well.

OUR FOOD SUPPLIES

I remember after Father and my sisters came back from Kielce, Rozka couldn't get a job at the workshop. She started to knit for a Polish woman who supplied her with yarn. In return she would bring us food supplies. My father made bases for electric hot plates and Uncle Abram sold them for him.

The Chronicle of the Lodz Journal explains our food situation as follows:

The Jewish community's allocations had included only basic items like flour, sugar, margarine and bread, but rations had been issued erratically. Rumors were that the food was sold on the private market, at much higher prices, and thus there was considerable corruption. Rubinstein and his friends, the Council of Elders, had been living well, right up to the last minute. In spite of this, food was important, but not a pressing issue in Pabianice, for Jews obtained

food through their contacts with the civilian population. They also sold their valuables and clothing in exchange for foodstuffs. But, these comforts were not unaccompanied by incidents. Time and again they were forcibly dragged out to work and their apartments searched on one pretext or another and everything they owned taken. Although they lived in constant fear, no one died of hunger.

RESETTLEMENT TO LODZ GHETTO

On Saturday May 16, 1942, we were ordered to assemble in front of our buildings at four o'clock PM and then marched to the Krusche and Ender Company's athletic field. We thought a census was going to be taken so we hardly took anything along with us. We were placed in the center of the field, surrounded with machine guns and German soldiers, then segregated according to the letters received during a recent medical examination. People with the letter A (*arbeitsfähig*—able to work) and those who possessed working papers were ordered to pass to one side, while the unfit, the aged, the sick and children and those with the letter B were not allowed to go to persons in Group A.

Infants were torn from mothers; children ran crying and screaming around the field, looking for their parents, while their parents, unable to regard these scenes, begged the German guards to allow them to take their children with them. In response, they were shoved back, their children were torn from their arms and thrown to the ground like balls, and even thrown over the fence.

We remained on the field until evening; it was a day of heavy rains and we were all drenched to the marrow. Those in Group B were loaded into peasant wagons and taken away to parts unknown, while the A group were loaded into trains to the Lodz Ghetto.

Our family stayed together as long as possible until the horrible, dreaded moment. Mother, Grandmother, and Frumka and Yacov stayed with the B group. Somehow in our minds was a picture of farms where our loved ones would perform light labor in the fields. Rozka, myself and Father were about to face a harsh life. Till the end of the war, we were hoping that if we survive, we'll all be reunited again.

I had another uncle Chaim Burech, my mother's brother in Pabianice Ghetto with his wife Rachela. They lived in the same house as the Council of the Elders. They were very friendly with them and received special favors (extra rations of food).

They were forewarned about the upcoming resettlement to the Lodz Ghetto and they wound up in Piotrkow. Eventually, they were taken to concentration camps. My uncle died and Aunt Rachela was liberated and taken to Sweden to recuperate. She remarried and lived in New York where we visited her several times. She died in 1963 after abdominal surgery.

One other brother of my mother's, Uncle David, lived in Lodz with his wife Malka and daughter. They were sent away with killing transports before we came to Lodz Ghetto.

LODZ GHETTO

The three of us arrived in the Ghetto Lodz. We were fortunate to have all of Father's relatives in Lodz. For a time we stayed with our Uncle David, Aunt Lea (my father's sister) and their two daughters, Gita and Golda. Their son, Gershon, died of tuberculosis. My aunt was a skeleton of her former self, as I knew her before the war. Day and night she was mourning her son. She died soon after we came to the Ghetto of a broken heart. My father's youngest brother, Abram, was ill with TB and his health was failing by the day, even though his wife started to deal in the black market to get him food and medicine. He had been imprisoned and tortured by the *Kripo* (German criminal police). They confiscated his hardware and paint store and arrested him when the Ghetto was created. He, too, died shortly after we came.

As incredible as it seems, we were absorbed in our own misery. First, we were sick with dysentery, not accustomed to a diet of mostly vegetables. Weak and distraught, we had to apply for a place to live, for work and ration cards. After losing half our family, I wonder how we ever got the initiative to go on living.

Uncle Israel Izbicki and Aunt Machcia, my father's sister and their son and daughter, Shimon and Fruma, fared better. He landed a job as a distributor of

vegetables and my aunt was distributing soup to various workshops. Anyone who was around food could help themselves. They got better rations to begin with. When we came, my uncle, David Dembinski, told my father that Uncle Israel had a bag of gold pieces that belonged to their pre-war business and wasn't going to share with his partners. He knew where it was hidden, so they got into their apartment and divided the gold equally among the three partners. That helped us to buy extra breads on the black market.

We finally got a room on Franciszkanska Street on the third floor. Our relatives supplied us with bedding, dishes, linens, and some clothes. I started work in Marysin in a straw shoe workshop. It was a long walk to Marysin and the work was hard, especially in the winter without heat and little food. There was a girl that often sang the *Yiddishe Mome* and each time I heard the word Mother, I would start sobbing uncontrollably. I cried a lot in those days. I missed my mother terribly. Trying to light a fire in the stove would make me cry; I was pretty clumsy. I developed gall bladder problems and severe pains in the stomach. A doctor gave me some medication that helped. As time went by, I learned to live with the situation and learned that time does heal most wounds.

I can't remember exactly how this came about, but Father got a job in a warehouse of fabrics. He would distribute material to various tailor shops. He bribed someone with influence, with a loaf of bread to secure him this work. My sister Rozka was accepted to a dressmaking workshop at Mrs. Luel (not a relative) at finishing. She was very talented at sewing and about any hand crafts. They made and altered clothes for the elite and wives of the elite.

Many of the clothes came from deported or resettled Jews from various places. My sister found once a little diamond in a seam of a dress. She brought it home and Father told her to sew it into her bra.

UNCLE ABRAM

My Uncle Abram was also in Lodz Ghetto. (His wife and three children with all our loved ones, as we learned after the liberation, were murdered in Chelmo.) He lived with his wife's parents, their oldest daughter, husband and

children. They were still in their apartment from before the war and they had friends that were influential in the Ghetto. As a result, my uncle was able to work as an electrician. I don't remember exactly where he worked in the Ghetto, but occasionally he brought us potato peels and coffee grounds. We would grind this all up and make sort of a pudding (*babka*), place it in a container and simmer it in a pot of water. My uncle provided us with an electric hot plate that we used only during the night and hide it in the daytime. Electricity was allowed only for light.

In 1943, as explained in the *Lodz Chronicle*, for the first time in the history of the Ghetto, Jews were assigned to white collar jobs, originating outside the Ghetto. The organizing of the bureau, employed a substantial number of clerical workers. When I found out about this, I applied for the job, again with the help of Uncle Abram. I was allowed to quit the straw shop and started to work at the office on Rybna Street. It was nice to go to work in fairly decent clothes. I met a few girls who went with me to gymnasium Wiedza (knowledge) and Rivka Olej, a girl I befriended in Pabianice Ghetto. We were supposed to do some elaborate statistical work on a survey conducted by questionnaire on fuel consumption. I cannot remember exactly, but all this lasted a few weeks. Without any explanation, we were told not to report to work any more and the office was closed.

Since everyone had to work in order to get ration cards, I started at a tailor shop at finishing (hand sewing as opposed to a sewing machine). It was probably at the end of January or February of 1943. The head of the huge factory was a Glazer. My father worked at the warehouse of the same complex. The only food during the long day was a bowl of soup, mainly water with a floating potato, if you were lucky. We also received ration cards by-weekly. Some people consumed their rations in a couple of days and starved till the next ration.

MY BELOVED FATHER

We fared better and all the credit must go to Father. He watched and rationed our food so that it would last for the prescribed time. He also bought a bread occasionally on the black market with gold pieces. I would not be alive today if it weren't for my father.

Much has been written about starvation and slave labor. We received food rations twice a month, a few ounces of flour or sugar or margarine, some bread and occasionally rotten potatoes or cabbage. At work you got some watery soup. Many people consumed the food in a matter of few days and the rest of the time subsisted on a bowl of soup a day at work. They were slowly dying of starvation. My father divided our rations so we had something to sustain us every day for the two weeks. Of course, we were always hungry and tired; however, he kept us surviving. I woke up once in the middle of the night with severe abdominal cramps. Father stayed up all night, keeping a fire in the stove and wrapping the stove grates in cloth to make hot compresses for me.

My father was very religious and observant and was tolerant of other people and their beliefs. He tried to assemble a normal family life in abnormal, incredibly horrible circumstances. He had a lifetime of experience and his guidance was important. In the Ghetto father made *matzo* for *Pesach* from our meager rations.

In the spring of 1944, with my Father's influence, I got permission to work for two weeks in Marysin where the elite from the Ghetto had parcels of land and a "lucky" few like me were brought in to work on them. It was nice to work outdoors for your daily soup and eat some raw vegetables from the plot.

It must have happened soon afterwards—One day after I came home from work, Father was home and said that the Jewish police searched our room. They found fabric remnants that Father used to bring home sometimes. Rozka made underwear and some clothes. As a punishment, he was fired from his job

and assigned to night watchman. This didn't seem too bad because his days were free, but our fear was that they might send him away to work outside the Ghetto.

Even though we heard awful rumors about gas chambers, we didn't believe it possible. Nevertheless, our fear was constant. Somehow we lived with our never-ending hunger and exhaustion from long hours at hard work. We existed with little hope for the future. We lived from day to day, trying not to think. Most of the time, we thought of our gnawing hunger. At every opportunity, I would try to sleep.

I was so weak that falling asleep was not a problem. After I finished the number of garments I was supposed to do, I'd lie down on the bolts of fabrics under the table and go to sleep to escape reality. It may be possible that I survived the war hibernating at every chance I got.

RESETTLEMENT FROM LODZ TO AUSCHWITZ

And so, our worst premonitions came to pass. Father got a notice to register for labor outside the Ghetto. The manager of his workshop gave his name. The terror began! I went to beg the manager to reconsider, but to no avail.

At this time, the terror started for the whole population of the Ghetto. The Germans demanded more and more people, presumably for labor, to clear the debris of the bombed German cities. Actually, the liquidation of the Ghetto began and the "resettlement."

The first transport left June 23, 1944. Father didn't obey the order and we went into hiding. There was an attic over our third floor where we lived. We would go up the ladder and then haul it up. We would spend the day in the attic and at night go down to our room to get some food, if we had any. The heat in the attic was unbearable. Under the agony of terror, starvation and exhaustion, we gave up in August. We came down from the attic on a Sunday (sometimes

they didn't search on Sunday) to see if we could scrounge some food. Suddenly, we heard dogs barking in the courtyard. German soldiers were searching through the apartment house. It was too late to hide.

"Why are you still here?" they asked and took us and a few bundles of clothes that we took along to the streetcar and on to the train. A cattle train. It's all very hazy, how we got on and the ride itself. I guess it all seemed so unbelievable, to be loaded tightly into a wagon to an unknown destination. Our belongings were thrown helter skelter into a pile and we were thinking that it will be impossible to find our things in it.

We were starved, emaciated, and in a daze. I can't picture clearly how it all happened. We arrived in Auschwitz in the middle of the night. Pitch dark and suddenly something like from a nightmare. Dogs barking, soldiers everywhere, and men called *capos* in striped clothing, like pajamas, yelling and pushing us. *Schnell, schnell* (faster, faster), dragging us out of the wagons and marching us somewhere. The *capos* were prisoners, as we were, but were forced to be in charge of the rest of us. They had to do this for survival. We feared them. It was their "job" to keep order. Father still had a few pieces of gold. He hid it under some barrack. Before we had a chance to orient ourselves, they separated Rozka and myself from Father. It was all happening so fast.

THE MARCH TO THE SHOWERS

We were told to undress, this time by the women *capos*. Again, everything was being thrown in a big pile. This huge naked procession was marched through a long hallway to a place where our heads and all body hair was shaved. They looked into our mouths for hidden jewels. Then we were marched to the showers of disinfection.

It seems to me that Rozka and myself were unaware that a segregation selection was being held at some point. Old people and children were sent to the gas chambers; workers were kept alive. I think that we both expressed our

feeling that all this was not happening to us, that we are on the outside looking in on some terrible scene. To this day, I still have this eerie feeling. It may have been a way to protect our sanity.

After the shower, we were given a dress and a pair of shoes. No underclothes. Then we were taken to the barracks. It is difficult to describe what it looked like. You can see the pictures at Yad Vashem. Living skeletons lay on stacked sleeping platforms in their barracks. There must have been a thousand people in a barrack. For loss of a better description, there were three tiers of bunks like uninterrupted wooden shelves along the walls. A couple of *capos*, well-fed women in high boots and a rubber club in hand, were keeping order.

AUSCHWITZ CAMP

We were in Auschwitz three weeks. Every day at dawn there was a roll call, *appell*. It was early fall. With hardly any clothes on, we were chased out at dawn in front of the barrack. We had to stand at attention, lined up four or five in a row, first in freezing cold and after a while, the sun beating on us unmercifully. We were counted forever, first by the *capos*, and then by the various German officials. These roll calls went on two or three times daily. We were not allowed to sit down, stoop down, or lean on each other. It was sheer torture. Many women fainted; some went insane and ran to the electric wires which surrounded the camp. They were always caught and beaten severely.

There was a common wash room in camp, a huge barrack with an aluminum trough along the walls and faucets at intervals. We tried to get to the washroom at least once a day. The water was cold, no soap, not even a rag to wipe ourselves.

The latrine was a huge barrack, boards throughout its length with holes at intervals. It became a sort of meeting place. Occasionally we met someone we knew from another barrack or someone we thought long dead.

And again, as odd as it seems, in the midst of this terrible place, Rozka and I still didn't comprehend what was going on in Auschwitz. There was no mention of gas or crematoria. The camp was so vast and divided by electrified wires. After the war, I found out what happened in detail.

I have recently read an article that Yad Vashem in Jerusalem has a wealth of documentary films, some dealing with what survivors have lived through, but never saw or completely understood. In Auschwitz, for example, each inmate was only aware of a small part of the camp in which he or she stayed. We had no concept of how it functioned as an extermination camp.

At various times, we were chased out from our barrack, told to take off our clothes, and went through an inspection by German officials. This happened several times during our three-week stay in Auschwitz. This time we were taken to another barrack without any bunks and told to lie down on the floor. After a few days and more showers and disinfection, we boarded a train and went to Freiberg am Main.

FREIBERG am MAIN

I don't remember the details. I don't remember anything about the arrival except that we were assembled in a big hall and an *obershaftfuhrer* gave a harsh speech on how we have to obey orders. They called out several of us by number. We had no names; we were assigned numbers in Auschwitz upon arrival. My number was 53820. There was no time for tattoos; we had to remember our number. I have certification from Mauthausen. I was also called. He slapped each one of us very hard on each cheek. I was humiliated. I was never singled out before and it hurt terribly, emotionally and physically.

We were placed in a building next to an aircraft factory. The rooms had military iron bunk beds three tiers high, two to a bed. We may have been a hundred to a room, several rooms on the same floor. There was a common washroom on the floor with indoor plumbing and central heating.

Again, cold water only, no soap or towel, but somehow we accumulated some rags. Occasionally, on Sundays, we would bring buckets of hot water from the kitchen of another building and scrub and wash our meager clothes. It seems that all the Germans and kitchen help (I think they were Russian prisoners of war) were away on Sundays. We were taking a terrible chance of being caught. To get to the kitchen, we had to go down three flights of stairs, across a courtyard to another building. The irony of it all, in spite of the difficulties, every so often a Russian woman doctor prisoner examined our hair to check if we were clean. By this time, our hair had grown back. From scraps of metal found in the factory, we made combs.

Our overseer was Marysia, a woman from Lodz Ghetto. Large, good looking, confident, she happened to be pregnant. She was appointed by the *obershafter*. With the help of a crew of women, she reigned supreme. We were counted, twice a day, before and after work. They distributed our meager rations of bread and soup.

THE LAST MONTHS OF THE WAR

At the factory a German meister was assigned a number of women to work with him, riveting parts of airplanes. I worked for an old German who asked me once if I would have learned the German language in school, had I known what would happen to me. He gave me baking soda to brush my teeth at a time when we desperately needed food. We did wash our clothes with the baking soda, though.

These were the last months of the war and I think ours was just busy work to keep the older Germans occupied. In the event of an air raid, they went to special shelters and we were left at the aircraft factory. No one displayed any fear. As usual, I found a corner and went to sleep. Strange as it seems, I cannot recall people being ill, having colds. I guess the germs or bacteria found nothing to thrive on.

The last month or two, we were transferred to barracks within walking distance of the factory. Finally, in April, we were loaded on cattle trains and after two weeks arrived in Mauthausen. Even though these were the final days of war, it's most painful for me to write about. It's mainly the gnawing guilt that perhaps we should have taken some initiative, taken some action to run away.

THE TRAINS TO MAUTHAUSEN

At first on the train to Mauthausen, we were in open cattle cars. The weather happened to be nice and it was nice to be in the open air. At some point, we were transferred to closed wagons, terribly crowded. The horrible hunger with lack of air had a devastating effect on Rozka. She desperately wanted to get out of the car. I held her in my arms like a child and calmed her.

When we were transferred to a different train, we were left out in an open field. There were plenty of bushes around and I feel that we could have hidden somewhere until the train left and then we could have gone into hiding in the countryside. There is no telling what would have happened if we were caught. I feel, however, that my sister might have had a chance of surviving if we hadn't been in Mauthausen. We were brought here to be exterminated in the crematoria.

At first we were at a Serbian prisoners camp and after a couple of days taken to a quarry, so called a gypsy camp—huge barracks with people lying on the bare cement floor, packed like sardines. All this humanity—no food or drink, filth everywhere, rampant dysentery, the so-called latrines, actually just holes in the ground, in deplorable condition.

THE AMERICAN ARMY

The American Army liberated the camp in a couple of weeks. It was too late for many, many of us. The American medical corps tried to help. They brought in large containers of cream of wheat. Many people died after being fed, their bodies or stomachs not able to absorb or digest any food.

We were transferred to decent barracks used previously by German officers, one person to a bunk bed. The majority of people suffered diarrhea; some were not able to walk. Malnutrition doesn't stop the day that food is administered. Many, including my sister, were bedridden, very ill with what must have been tuberculosis. They were put in a different block. My sister received glucose intravenously. I tried to talk to the doctor who seldom came around. We were not able to communicate because of the language barrier. The little I understood—he couldn't do much for her. If she had skilled, individual care, perhaps she might have recovered. She died July 10, 1945. Instead of rejoicing at being liberated and surviving the holocaust, I was sad, empty, no hope for my future or for the world's.

THE RUSSIANS TAKE OVER

After a short time, the Russians took over and they insisted that all displaced people go back to the country of their birth. I didn't want to go back to Poland. From lists of survivors, I found out that my father was in Munich and I wanted to go there.

In the meantime, people were loaded on buses to their destination. I decided to hide out and didn't go along. Afterwards, they organized a sort of hospital in the village of what must have been previously a guesthouse. I befriended a Jewish nurse. She was a friend of the Jewish doctor who took care of the remaining sick people. They took us along to help with the sick.

That gave me time to plan for my trip to Munich. First I had to get from the Russian zone to the American, and then I had to get over the border from Austria to Germany. You needed passes wherever you went. I didn't have any money, but there were camps for displaced people all along where you could get lodgings and food. I remember a Russian couple helping me to smuggle over a border, a Polish man giving me a pass to cross a river in a barge, and two Jewish men loading me on an overcrowded train. It seemed that the whole world was on the run.

DISPLACED PERSONS CAMP

I finally arrived in Munich and in one of the displaced persons camps, I found out that my father used to live in an apartment with a few boys from Pabianice. They did some smuggling. The German police found out and arrested them, along with my father. After they let him go, he went to the DP camp in Feldafing. That's where our sad reunion took place. Father expected Rozka and myself. It was a very emotional, tearful reunion. We cried for the untimely tragic loss of my sister and our whole family that perished.

Father survived Dachau thanks to Goldberg, an artist of stained glass. When the Germans in Dachau asked who is a painter, my father volunteered. He knew about paints because my grandparents and uncle had a hardware store in Lodz. He was very good at making patterns for textile fabrics for shirts and cotton materials.

Father was assigned to work with Goldberg. They would get into German houses to work and get some extra food and sometimes steal vitamins, *Vigantol*, from medicine cabinets. Uncle Israel and his son Shimon were also at Dachau and my father told me that he shared vitamin drops with them, but they were not able to survive the hard labor and starvation.

After some time in camp, we got a room in a villa. Feldafing was a beautiful village in the mountains on a beautiful lake, Starnberger See.

Father got a job in camp working in an office of a shoe factory. I worked in an office of a workshop for painting signs for the camp. We got the jobs through Goldberg, the stained glass artist who saved my father's life in Dachau. I think he was head of an organization with Communist leanings because they kept it secret. People that worked in the DP camps received special rations, canned American foods and Camel cigarettes. That's when I started smoking. I also got a two-week vacation to a beautiful ski resort in the Bavarian Mountains.

A NEW LIFE

My father had four uncles living in New Jersey. They came to America in the 1920's, Our families were never in touch with them in the past. I never even knew they existed. Evidently, they found out from the list of survivors at DP camps about us. Uncle Jack wrote to us and offered to send papers and tickets. I was very much against it. After all the horrors that we experienced, our whole family murdered by the Nazis, we should be going to Israel, our homeland that welcomes Jews.

My father thought that after losing our whole family and extended family, perhaps we can find again relatives that care and who would help us to start a new life in the United States. My father and I came to the United States on June 25, 1946, on the ship Marine Perch.

In the summer of 1947, I met Leon, my husband, at a picnic in Spring Valley, New York. He also survived the Holocaust in Lithuania. He came from Pittsburgh to spend his vacation in New York. A mutual friend, Joe Gerstein, brought him to the picnic and I came with my relatives. We were married on January 25, 1948 in Patterson, New Jersey.

Eventually we settled in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. We have three children and six grandchildren.

Sarah (Luel) Brett

915 Club Drive

Johnstown PA 15905

814 /255-3108

